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ABSTRACT

Until the 1960's, the prevailing view within the scientific community was that television was a relatively unimportant influence, but studies have shown that television does have an important effect on the behavior of its viewers, particularly aggressive behavior. Consequently, recent research has focused on the role of television in the socialization process, although support for such research has been sparse. Of special importance is research that will lay the foundation for Federal Communications Commission and Federal Trade Commission rulings that affect the content of television broadcasts. Since the impact of broadcast media in the future will probably be much broaler and subject to less central control, it is important that present decisions be based on solid research. (EMH)

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TELEVISION AND THE YOUNG: SETTING THE STAGE FOR A RESEARCH AGENDA*

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By George Comstock

The Rand Corporation

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TELEVISION AND THE YOUNG: SETTING THE STAGE FOR A RESEARCH AGENDA

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It is my responsibility to outline the background to this conference. Let me give you a preview. I will first briefly outline six backdrops to our work which relate directly to research on young persons and television. Then I will draw attention to a seventh factor, which is much broader in nature. If you are metaphorically inclined, you can think of the latter as the large stage on which the six backdrops are arranged.

This conference has the potential to be an important and influential event. We are here to formulate guidelines for future research on the role of television in the lives of young persons. There are six varied backdrops to our performance. They are:

- o First, the historical evolution of such research to date.
- o Second, the research priorities currently held within the scientific community.
- o Third, the pattern of prior support for such research.
- o Fourth, the many signs of high interest in the topic.
- o Fifth, the conflicts between a science-oriented approach to research and one which is intended to guide decisionmaking and social innovation.

And,

- o Sixth, new options for the organization and conduct of such research.

Naturally, the task of imposing order on reality results in a simplified picture which perhaps is not everyone's picture. Unfortunately, that is the price for some degree of clarity.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

Let us begin with history. There are three sets of events which symbolize the developments which lead to the present.

One is the publication in a prestigious scientific journal in 1963 of two laboratory experiments:

o "Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models," by Bandura, Ross, and Ross.[1]

And,

o "Effects of Film Violence on Inhibitions Against Subsequent Aggression," by Berkowitz and Rawlings.[2]

I do not single out these studies because they support the hypothesis that television violence can increase aggressiveness on the part of young viewers. I do single them out with the knowledge that a good history would give a very prominent place to the large-scale studies in the United States by Schramm, Lyle, and Parker and in England by Himmelweit and her colleagues, as well as to a number of other notable studies.[3] In fact, a recent review and analysis purporting to cover the "key studies" of television and human behavior includes about 450 items, and the majority of them concern young persons.[4]

I single out these two studies for reasons quite apart from their intrinsic merits. They are important to us not for what they are, but for what they represent.

When these studies were published, the prevailing view within the scientific community was that television had few effects on young persons. These studies initiated a shift in thinking. That shift led to the current prevailing view, which is that there are a wide range of possibly important relationships between television and the lives of young persons.

The second singular event can be described most economically as the "Surgeon General's study" of television and young persons. As you may know, this "study" included about 25 individual research projects costing a total of about $1 million. As part of this undertaking, the findings of this research, along with evidence from earlier research, were reviewed by a special 12-member scientific

advisory committee. The final output was five volumes containing 60 separate papers and reports by social scientists totaling 2,330 pages, and a 169-page committee report.[5]

The most visible important outcome is that this committee, which included several network representatives, concluded that there was evidence of a causal relationship between exposure to television violence and aggressiveness. However, this program also had several other, equally important outcomes:

o One is that it directed the attention of the scientific community away from violence, toward new areas. Partly, this occurred because the positive inference drawn by the committee dramatized the possibility that there might be other relationships involving television worth investigating. After all, the positive finding is the raw gold of scientific endeavor. Partly, it occurred because the program exhausted a number of avenues in regard to the influence of television violence. Although much remained to be done, much also now had been done.

There are three principal areas toward which scientific attention was redirected:

-- First, toward new topics, such as television's actual and potential contribution to other kinds of behavior, such as cooperation, help, and leadership.

-- Second, toward the psychological and social processes behind effects, of which aggressiveness was now considered only one possibility.

-- Third, toward the circumstances and conditions which might mitigate undesired effects, or which might enhance desired effects.

o Another is that major questions were raised about the credibility of methods honored by science. Prior to the Surgeon General's study, about 50 experiments had demonstrated within the confines of the laboratory that young persons who viewed something the investigators labeled "violent" on film or television immediately thereafter were more likely to respond in a manner the investigators judged was "aggressive." They fell into two classes:

-- About 20 laboratory experiments demonstrated that young children would imitate such observed violence.

-- About 30 laboratory experiments demonstrated that the nonimitative aggressiveness of children and adolescents increased after observing such violence. All were published in scientifically reputable sources. Many were much admired within the scientific community. All employed the most rigorous and most recommended method available for causal inference, the laboratory experiment.

Yet, the Surgeon General's study was undertaken. The fact was that, for many, the laboratory experiment was seen as not producing results generalizable to real life. The credibility of the method was not persuasive beyond the scientific community.

What the Surgeon General's study added, and what the positive inference of the committee turned upon, was evidence from experiments in real-life settings and from surveys which measured real-life viewing and real-life aggressiveness. As a result, a major legacy of this program is the striking demonstration that under some circumstances a single method, however powerful in certain respects, is inadequate. The reason does not lie with a particular flaw of the laboratory experiment. Instead, it lies in the fact that no methodological genre is free from plausible criticism when it comes to drawing inferences about real-life cause and effect. Let us put this legacy in the form of a proposition: The greater the degree of vested interest or controversy, the less credible will be findings produced by a single methodological genre and the greater will be the need to employ a multiplicity of methods, each with different strengths.

The third singular event is the appearance of Children's Television Workshop (CTW). From the perspective of this conference, its major relevance is not its demonstration that high quality children's entertainment is possible, but that research can play a role in the formation and development of superior children's programming, and

that such programming, at least under certain conditions, can contribute to the education of children. Like the Surgeon General's study, CTW has widened the range of television-related interests within the scientific community. It has turned attention toward:

-- Research to design better programs intended for young persons.

-- Research to identify ways in which television may contribute positively to the lives of young persons.

To Sum Up:

When the 1960s began, the prevailing view within the scientific community was that television was relatively without important influence. Laboratory experiments concerned with the effects of television violence began to alter that viewpoint. The trend culminated in the Surgeon General's study, which, by adding evidence from outside the laboratory, led a scientific advisory committee with network representation to conclude that television violence should be judged a cause of aggressiveness. The Surgeon General's study left at least two other legacies: A trio of new directions for research, and a demonstration that method and problem require careful matching. Children's Television Workshop further altered the situation by increasing interest in using research to increase television's positive role.

PRIORITIES WITHIN THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

The priorities held at present by the scientific community very much reflect these events. They are outlined in the volume distributed prior to the conference, Television and Human Behavior: The Research Horizon, Future and Present.[6]

It should be emphasized that this report does not advance these priorities as optimal. It merely reports on the priorities found to exist. It is one of the tasks of this conference to judge whether they are indeed optimal.

In terms of topics, the highest priority is given to the study of television in the socialization of young persons. This is the topic

commanding the greatest interest when all populations and all topics are considered. It is Number One among all possibilities for the study of television and human behavior.

Within this broad topic, there is at present high interest in four questions. Each concerns the role of television in contributing to:

- o Socially desirable, or "prosocial," behavior.
- o Role socialization, or the learning of expectations about the behavior of others and the responses which would be appropriate.
- o Political socialization.
- o Antisocial behavior.

Before the Surgeon General's study, the last would have been first by a wide margin.

Despite the concern expressed by many outside the scientific community over television advertising, only limited interest in noncommercial, scientific research on the effects of such advertising on young persons was found. The reasons are partly economic and partly sociological, but do not bar a future rise in interest.

In the past, there has been extremely limited support for such research. As a result, scientists are not accustomed to thinking of it as a possible area for study. Traditional disciplines have disdained research involving advertising as useful only for increasing its commercial impact, and therefore unworthy of science. There has also been considerable skepticism that results would have any practical influence. However, it was concluded that this topic could rise sharply in prominence were there signs of support; were attention focused on important issues, such as effects on health practices or basic values; and, were there evidence of genuine interest in using research to correct possible abuses.

This volatility of interest in response to events outside the scientific community is typical of the varied issues falling under the larger topic of socialization. The predominant motive is to study television's influence on young persons, and specific interests are relatively open to redirection.

In terms of methods, the highest priorities are given to:

o Naturalistic experimentation, in which the design is the same as for a laboratory experiment but the circumstances are everyday and as nonartificial in every respect as possible.

o Multiple methods, in which different methodological genres with compensating strengths are employed to study a single question.

o Improvement of techniques for panel studies in which measurement is made of the same group at various points in time, so that effects and their fluctuation as they actually occur in real time can be understood.

o Continuing adaptation of the laboratory experiment, so that its prowess in regard to causal inferences and its flexibility for studying questions difficult to study in other ways can be taken advantage of.

To Sum Up:

The study of the role of television in socialization is the major priority held by the scientific community in regard to television and human behavior. That this is true despite the fact that a majority of the 2,300 items which make up the scientific literature on television and behavior concern young persons is evidence that today's perspective differs from that of the past.[7] Within this topic, the foci of future research is open to considerable redirection, depending on support and other external factors. Among the latter will be the conclusions of this conference.

PATTERN OF SUPPORT

Our third backdrop is the pattern of prior support. When the funding data included in The Research Horizon, Future and Present were analyzed, it was found that for all populations and all topics, and excluding purely instructional applications, the total of research support for one year was under $2 million. This is about 2/100th

of one percent of the total spent on television by consumers and advertisers in one year in the early 1970s. The score for research devoted to television and young persons, of course, is somewhat less.

What is more important is that support for research on television and young persons is highly fragmented. Institutions involved include the three networks, various foundations, the Office of Child Development, the National Institute of Education, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the National Science Foundation. There is little, if any, coordination. Each acts in ignorance of the other. Furthermore, much of the research occurs within programs whose emphases are other than television, and the research is essentially undertaken in isolation from other research relevant to television.

Equally important is that the support is laissez faire. The typical approach is to solicit proposals on a vaguely defined topic, seek outside counsel on their quality, and fund on the basis of some wizardry involving the weighting of scientific merit and institutional interest. It is rare that there is the specification of requirements in terms of issue, method, or possible application. It is even more rare that such specifications, when voiced, are followed. Sometimes, what is eventually funded may support a theme unrelated to television. Rarely, very rarely, support is managed so that studies develop around a theme for which television is central.

To Sum Up:

Support for research on television and young persons amounts to a miniscule proportion of the annual investment in television. In addition, it has for the most part been fragmented, uncoordinated, and has not led to the development of research which systematically explores various themes to which television is central. One of the several tasks for this conference is to develop alternatives that would lead to better research.

SIGNS OF HIGH INTEREST

Nevertheless, there presently are many signs of high interest in the role of television in the lives of young persons and in research on the topic. To cite a few:

o The continuing activity of the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Television and Social Behavior, which three months ago issued its report on the feasibility and the desirability of a "violence profile."[8]

o The pressure from Congress and the Federal Communications Commission which led to the adoption of "family viewing" hours by the broadcasting industry earlier this year.

o The very publicly announced concern at the Federal Trade Commission over the effects on young persons of television advertising.

o The various recent Congressional hearings on television and young persons, including the 1972 and 1974 Senate hearings on violence and the House hearings earlier this year on advertising.

o The 1975 Aspen Foundation Forum on Communications, which two months ago reviewed a wide range of options for foundation action in regard to the mass media, including support for research.

o The continuing activities of various public interest organizations, such as Action for Children's Television and the Council on Children, Media, and Merchandising.

o The current effort by the Writers Guild of America to obtain Congressional hearings and, eventually, a "blue ribbon" commission to examine television's performance.

o The announcement by the National Science Foundation that it is considering greatly expanded support of research on television and social behavior, with emphasis on television and the young and on the effects of television advertising.

To Sum Up:

There are a wide variety of events which suggest that this is a time to reassess priorities. There is high interest in the topic,

continuing discussions and proposals, and increased need for more informative research. This conference has the opportunity to shape the eventual influence these various factors will have.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN RESEARCH APPROACHES.

Our fifth backdrop concerns certain conflicts between the way science conventionally operates the goals for science as expressed by some social scientists. When the priorities were analyzed, it was found that widespread interest was expressed within the scientific community in conducting research more relevant to various kinds of decisionmaking. Included are decisions that might be made by broadcasters, producers, and writers; by parents, teachers, and other community members; by various institutions; and, by such regulatory bodies as the FTC and the FCC. However, it was also concluded that there were some not-always-clearly-perceived conflicts between this desire and the ordinary conduct of science with which most social scientists are most at home.

There are two that are major:

o Action-oriented research derives from the practical options for action. Questions, however intriguing, may be ignored if there are no or limited consequences for action. Science-oriented research, in sharp contrast, selects questions on the basis of intrinsic interest to the investigator. For science, this is a very practical approach, because science-oriented research tests hypotheses in order to test and revise the theories from which such hypotheses are derived, and theory may be strengthened or weakened whether or not the issue under test itself has implications for action.

o Action-oriented research requires different criteria in regard to the valuation of outcomes. Science-oriented research attempts to avoid the acceptance of false propositions. Thus, the risk for accepting falsehood is set very low. Action-oriented research aims at improving directly the human condition. Thus, the

values are reversed. The responsibility here is not to reject a good social intervention or not to accept an undesirable condition.

Let us look again. It is sensible when science undertakes to accumulate knowledge -- which eventually may have wide and varied impact -- that the scientist will want to use a criterion that will protect him from mistaking a sampling idiosyncrasy for an actual relationship more than one out of 20 or 100 times. These are the conventional scientific criteria of .05 and .01 levels of statistical significance. It is not equally sensible to reject a specific plausible innovation or accept a specific apparently harmful situation unless the benefit or harm can be demonstrated with such certainty.

There is not one but two functions which research may serve. For each, different rules may be needed. There is the knowledge function, where the rules are those of science-oriented research. There is also the innovation function, where the rules must guard against ignoring what is helpful or what is harmful.

To Sum Up:

There is a high level of desire expressed by the scientific community to make research more relevant to decisionmaking. This realm is broadly construed by the community, and includes, but is not confined to, the issues on which the FCC or FTC might issue a rule. However, this desire conflicts with the conventional approach to research both in the selection of problems and in the evaluation of outcomes. As a result, the successful expression of this desire remains in doubt. One of the goals for this conference is to increase the likelihood that the desire will be realized.

NEW OPTIONS

Our sixth backdrop is made up of new options for the conduct of research on television and the young. This is an additional legacy

of the Surgeon General's study. Like many legacies of that program, it has nothing to do with violence.

When Bogart reviewed the various studies in the Public Opinion Quarterly, he concluded that the Surgeon General's study was unique in federal history as a focused program of research on the mass media.[9] Let us review some of the characteristics of such an approach:

o An encompassing theme is chosen, around which varied research is organized. One result is that the varied individual studies reinforce, complement, and question each other.

o There is a scientifically capable staff, which seeks out researchers, guides proposals and their implementation, and critiques draft reports. One result is increased quality of research.

o With the varied studies conducted within a single framework, there is the opportunity for inter-investigator cooperation and joint effort even when the desirability of such activity becomes clear only after the research is well underway.

o With a publication program, the research moves with extraordinary rapidity from completion to inclusion in the scientific and public domain. One result is increased impact on new research. Another is earlier availability for use by decisionmakers.

o Given a somewhat coherent effort, it is possible to have scientific impact quite outside the research actually conducted. In the case of the Surgeon General's study, one result was to involve a number of very vigorous young researchers with television, thereby increasing the capability of the scientific community.

o There is a built-in mechanism for review and integration with the existing scientific knowledge -- the report of the scientific advisory committee. One result is almost instant evaluation of the research. Another is further evaluation as the initial evaluation is debated by various interested parties.

To Sum Up:

The Surgeon General's study is the sole task force study of

the mass media consisting primarily of empirical research. Although an undertaking similar in approach is not necessarily desirable, the study offers a number of potentially helpful new options for increasing the relevance, quality, and impact of new research. One of the tasks before this conference is to evaluate the possible utility of these varied options.

Those are six backdrops to this conference. There is a seventh factor which I have set apart because it does not relate directly to research. However, its importance is great.

I refer to the future character of broadcasting in the United States. No one knows what the configuration among open commercial and public broadcasting, cable television, and in-home playback technology will be in a few years. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that among the changes will be new latitude for individual choice in viewing, the possibility of centralized intervention will be sharply curtailed, and there will be greater opportunities and greater problems in providing good television for young viewers. We do not have time to waste in obtaining whatever guidance we can from research. This is the stage on which our six backdrops are set.

That concludes my depiction of the background to this conference. Let me emphasize its relationship to our work here today and tomorrow.

This is not a conference about television. It is a conference about research on the role of television in the lives of the young. Our purpose is to produce a range of recommendations and guidelines for such research. To be useful, such guidelines must take into account the currents of the past and the present.

As you know, there are five workshops. Two are to give primary emphasis to research which could guide regulatory and related decision-making. Two are to give primary emphasis to research which could guide action outside the regulatory sphere, such as by parents,

teachers, broadcasters, and producers. One is to give primary emphasis to research to guide scientific understanding of the relationship between the young and television. Each is to make recommendations in regard to topics, methods, and possible innovations for the organization and conduct of research. Although the boundaries are obviously hazy, these specific emphases have been assigned to insure that these questions will be confronted directly.

This is intended as a working conference. Because of this, with a few exceptions, persons assigned to a specific workshop should expect to remain with that workshop throughout the conference. This is a conference in which attendance is synonymous with participation.

The specific goal is a report on the conclusions of each workshop which will be presented to the conference-as-a-whole by the workshop leader tomorrow. The larger, more distant intent is research different in character and superior in quality than would otherwise have occurred. We are going to be talking about research. What we are going to be doing is formulating policy for the conduct of social science.

FOOTNOTES

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